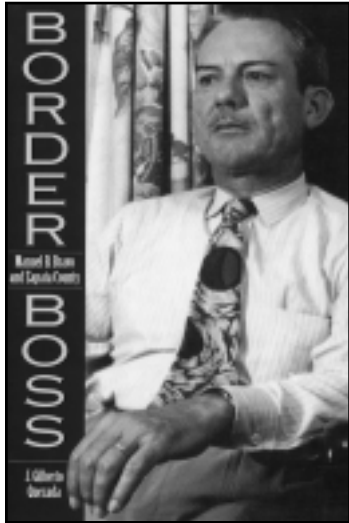


Politics South of the Nueces

Border Boss: Manuel B. Bravo and Zapata County by J. Gilberto Quezada. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999. 320 pp. \$29.95 cloth)

From 1937-1957, Manuel B. Bravo served as county judge in sparsely populated Zapata County, then one of just a few majority Hispanic districts in South Texas where Tejanos held most of the local leadership positions. Control of the county courthouse gave Bravo and his small coterie of peers in the Partido Viejo, a local faction of the Democratic Party, wide leverage over the county's affairs. Indeed, the same men who served as county commissioners sat on the school board, the Board of Equalization, and other local agencies.



As such, they played an inordinate role in controlling via patronage who got what in terms of services, contracts, and jobs from state and local governments and to a lesser extent, the private sector. In many respects,

as J. Gilberto Quezada's extensive and highly readable biography demonstrates, Bravo was a typical boss, *patrón* of the political machine, rewarding local citizens in exchange for political support at election time. The political bosses of South Texas rivalled that of their Northern counterparts made famous in depictions of New York's Tammany Hall. In election after election, bosses from Webb, Cameron, Duval, Hidalgo, and Starr counties made temporary and shifting alliances to extend their influence beyond their county confines in deciding who to support for higher office, including races for governor and the U.S. House and Senate.

However, Bravo, unlike other bosses, did not seek to punish his enemies. He often sought to recruit them to his side whenever possible. More importantly, he did not seem to exercise such control for luxurious personal gain. He lived a life of simple tastes, died with a modest house, and left no extravagant legacy for his family. Of course, Quezada, married to Bravo's granddaughter, might otherwise have an incentive to write history a certain way, but the author, with a master's degree in history from St. Mary's University, takes pains to ensure his portrait of Bravo is not rendered as a whitewash of the man. Indeed, despite avoiding personal aggrandizement via his political office, Bravo—as Quezada's story makes

plain—was a product of his times and did not hesitate to use the levers of his office to favor candidates, himself included, come election time.

Here, Quezada's narrative becomes more interesting because of a particular election—the Democratic primary run-off for the U.S. Senate in 1948 between Coke Stevenson and Lyndon Johnson. It is a pity Quezada doesn't linger more on this incident, one of the most famous in American politics in which LBJ earned the nickname of "Landslide Lyndon" for his 87-vote victory over Stevenson. As Robert Caro and Robert Dallek have reported in their respective biographies of Johnson, it is highly likely that, through unscrupulous means—namely ballot stuffing—South Texas political bosses were able to give LBJ a slim margin of victory over Stevenson, who undoubtedly used the same tactics.

The boss of (ill) repute is George B. Parr, the Duke of Duval County, who was said to have revised the totals in the now notorious Box 13 in Alice, Texas, with an extra 202 votes suddenly found for Johnson to Stevenson's one additional vote. Less well known is Bravo's participation in the unsavory electoral activity that bolstered Johnson's fortunes in that race. Zapata County's final vote tally inexplicably shifted in Johnson's favor in the waning days, to give LBJ an extra fifty votes and deprive Stevenson of those same fifty. During the post-election appeal by Stevenson, it was discovered that Zapata County's Precinct 3 returns were missing. This evidence was to be part of Stevenson's appeal until Johnson's behind-the-scenes negotiations scuttled the investigation that would have perhaps discredited Bravo and changed the course of American history. As it was, Stevenson was not to be Texas' U.S. Senator, and the civil rights movement ultimately found a political operator for the national stage as skilled as Manuel Bravo was on the local one.

It is also often asserted that Parr wielded influence beyond Duval County, even downright control over other South Texas counties. Quezada demonstrates, through voter returns and personal interviews of the principals (particularly of Bravo's widow), that South Texas counties often voted *contra* the wishes of Parr and that, at no time, did Parr exercise such hegemonic control over Bravo or other county bosses.

Ultimately, Quezada argues that bossism in South Texas "was rooted more in historical situations than anything inherent to ethnic culture," a result of geographic isolation and demography (nearly 100% Hispanic counties). This was enhanced by "a sense of peoplehood" through the embodiment of the party and its leaders whose status was secured through the delivery of social services and jobs and pragmatic responses to racial discrimination. One of Bravo's finest, though not entirely public performances, was the displeasure he exhibited via telegram to Senator LBJ at the refusal of an

continued on page 7

Politics South of the Nueces, continued

Anglo funeral home to cater to a World War II casualty of Mexican-American descent: "SO ABSURD AND UN-AMERICAN THAT IS A SHAME FOR IT TO HAPPEN IN THE GREAT STATE OF TEXAS."

The biography then takes a turn for more insular waters. Bravo's skills were tested when much of the county was to be inundated by Falcon Dam. Leading up to the dam's construction in the late 1940s and early 1950s and for years thereafter, Bravo dedicated much of his effort to coordinate the move of the county seat to a new location and to deal with the federal bureaucracy in charge of the dam, the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC). Aside from the need for funds to reconstruct public buildings—the courthouse, schools, and other services, Bravo sought just compensation for homeowners and landowners as well as the church and the sensitive issue of the town's cemetery. Bravo's contacts over decades with Johnson and the District's Congressmen—including Lloyd Bentsen, then Joe Kilgore, and later Kika de la Garza—ultimately resulted in a fairer settlement of claims than would have been possible if others had led Zapata County.

After a turn with Brown and Root in South America

(made possible via Bravo's contact with Johnson who never forgot the help he received in the 1948 election), Bravo returned to South Texas where he secured appointment with the IWBC from 1964-1969. It must be sweet justice for Bravo to oversee the final resolution of claims related to the dam, after having had limited success lobbying the agency a decade earlier.

In his quest to demonstrate that Tejano border bosses like Bravo were not merely "petty despots" (as Caro described them) subject to the control of an even stronger personality in Anglo George Parr, Quezada leaves an oft-made accusation—that these local leaders' loyalties were for sale to the highest bidder—underexplored. Despite this oversight, Quezada's biography of Bravo brings context and identifiable people into relief, disposing of the un-nuanced stereotypes of Hispanic leaders of the age without undermining the drama that makes the history of Texas politics so compelling.

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Chasing Villa, Carranza, and Pershing, continued

I hope that most modern Mexican historians have abandoned it. I think there were several specific things involved apart from the long-standing historical animosity, cultural and racial, between these two nations. It is a complex problem, which may be why Stout decided to leave it alone.

A few final thoughts on this interesting and informative book. For many Texas readers who with little Mexican history would like to catch up after Vincente Fox's recent victory over PRI, this would be a great late-summer read.

First, there is the phenomenon of summary executions. I'm sure most people have seen old movies, usually set in Latin America or southern Europe, where one or two culprits are backed up against a wall facing a firing squad. Usually they are offered blindfolds and cigarettes and maybe a few last words. Sometimes they are saved at the last minute; more often Hollywood liked to shoot them down. In Mexico, during this period, there were no blindfolds and no cigarettes. Both sides shot their enemies down in droves immediately upon capture. Villa was the worst about this, once executing forty at a time and telling his aides to delay the event until he could get there to see it! Some people might say, "Well, it was a civil war, and you have to expect that sort of thing."

Indeed it was a civil war. The U.S. had fought an incredibly bloody one only seventy years before—father

against son, brother against brother. But paradoxically, the only executions you read about in our civil war were *within* the competing armies, for cowardice, desertion, etc.

Second, Stout can't seem to capture the reality of the Mexican Revolution. This is the best that he can do:

Throughout the Mexican Revolution, family members often traveled with the soldiers and fought alongside them. *Soldaderos*—under the most difficult of conditions—played an important role, carrying out domestic chores, taking care of the wounded, and providing general support. Some women even joined in combat, leading troops into battle.

Compare that with Katherine Anne Porter's fictional descriptions of the Revolution in *Flowering Judas* and *Other Stories*, and you'll see what I mean. You even get to meet a version of Pancho Villa in one of her stories.

What military historian could read this without breathing a sigh of relief? The strategy is there. The tactics are there. The research is there. This work has a place on the bookshelf, not only for military history buffs but for anyone interested in the history of Mexico.

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